

Asherah, the Tree of Life and the Menorah : Continuity of a Goddess symbol in Judaism?

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The First Sophia Fellowship Feminist Theology Lecture .

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I am very happy to be here today to give the first Sophia lecture in Feminist Theology, and to have had the most interesting experience this term of living and working among you, taking part in the life of the College. I will express my appreciation and thanks to all who have helped me, later. They have given me the opportunity of taking up research on a theme that has been of interest for a long time; what I present to you tonight is part of work in progress.

That there might be a connection, rooted in the Hebrew bible, between the female figure there named Asherah, the Garden of Eden, the Tree of Life and the Menorah (the seven branched candlestick of Jewish life and ritual) occurred to me when in 1991 I was writing a study of the biblical divine female figure of Wisdom, Hochma in Hebrew, Sophia in Greek. To some extent it appeared that Hochma was the alter ego of God presented in the feminine gender. In doing this work I looked at other female divine figures in the Hebrew bible, of whom Asherah was certainly one of the most prominent. Where Hochma, Wisdom, encapsulated the comprehension of creation and the brilliance of order and the intellect, it seemed that Asherah stood for the concept of life, its physicality, its sacrality, its cyclical renewal within nature and the hope by the human beings who worshipped her that such renewal was some sort of symbol of eternal life.

It seemed of particular interest that this female divine figure was always associated with trees. LXX translated the word Asherah into in Greek as also, grove, or else, groves, or occasionally by dendra, trees; Vulgate in Latin provided lucus or nemus, a grove or a wood (thus KJV bible uses grove or groves with the consequent loss of Asherah's name and knowledge of her existence to English language readers of the bible over some 400 years).

I noticed then the possibility that the special tree, the Tree of Life might act as a signal concerning the presence of this divine female being. The familiar Genesis 3:24, (normally accepted as written by the J element in biblical composition) tells us that the human being (ha-adam) was driven out of the garden of Eden and that God placed the cherubim with a flaming sword which turned every way, to guard the way to the tree of life. On the other hand, Prov. 3:18 tells us of female Wisdom "she shall be a tree of life to all who lay hold on her". The contrast here was striking. For the J writer of Genesis, the Tree of Life was denied when our foreparents had gained knowledge of good and evil, yet the Wisdom writer at approximately the same period commended it to the seeker as divine female wisdom. The questions raised were linked. Is Gen 3:24 an expression of the prohibition of worship of a goddess figure who might be Asherah? And is Prov. 3:18 a relic of the popular religious veneration of the female in deity? (Long:1992: 130-31) At the time I was able only to follow through the material about Wisdom but today as a result of the courtesy of this college I am happy to present to you some account of Asherah and the tree of life, and a possible symbol of both that has lasted throughout history, and I am doing so within the context of feminist theology.

Since I started my biblical researches some years ago I have been encouraged by the words of the distinguished scholar Peter Ackroyd. He suggested that the hostile portrayal of goddesses in the Hebrew bible, was part of a polemic. Its aim was as to discredit any cult of goddesses and to classify them as alien rather than

part of the Hebrew popular religion (Ackroyd: 1983: 256). From there it was a short step to the ideas of feminist theologians which provided the encouragement to pursue the study further. I have been particularly struck with Rosemary Ruether's formulation which calls upon us to find a remedy for the age old exclusion of women from the norms of divinity and of humanity (Radford Ruether 1992:14-19), and with Elisabeth Schussler Fiorenza's methodology for so doing. This, following Ricoeur, she has named the hermeneutics of suspicion. We are not to be intimidated by the androcentricity of the texts but must search for the female who has been obscured. (Schussler Fiorenza 1984:15-18) In my case, I have been seeking not so much the stories of the women in the Hebrew scriptures but whether a female dimension of deity is to be found there.

One solution to this question was proposed two decades or so ago by Phyllis Trible who has discussed at length the many female characteristics of God in the Hebrew bible. She linked them first with Gen 1:27: "God created the human being in his own image, male and female created he them"; and then, with the cognate Hebrew words for compassion (rahamim), and for the womb, rehem (Trible: 1978:33). This had the great value to those seeking a female dimension, but within tradition, of keeping a monotheistic stance intact. However, Trible's work does not satisfy the many questions that arise from archaeological finds, chief of which is iconographic and linguistic evidence for a proposition summed up by archaeologist Ze'ev Meshel in the question "Did Yahweh have a consort?" (1979) and by the title of fellow archaeologist Richard Pettey's more recent book "Asherah Goddess of Israel." (1990)

What do we mean by the Asherah?

There are 40 references to Asherah in the Hebrew bible, almost all couched in hostile terms. Forms of the name include the singular Asherah, or plural either Asherim or Asheroth. The form Ashtoreth is also found, containing the vowels of the Hebrew word bosheth meaning shame, put in by later redactors.

A few texts from RSV translation will provide a touch of their flavour. Deut 12.2 calls upon the people to "tear down their altars, dash in pieces their pillars and burn their Asherim with fire." 16:21 commands them not to plant any living tree as an Asherah beside the altar of the Lord. Judges 6:25/26 not only insists that the Asherah which the Hebrews have built beside the altar of Baal be cut down but also it must provide the wood to make a burnt offering of the bull that was used to pull down the shrine. There are also references to the Asherah as an image in the temple of Yahweh: (2K 21:7) while the account of Josiah's reform recounts the high priest's actions in bringing out not only the vessels made for Asherah in addition to those made for Baal and the host of heaven) but also the Asherah itself from the house of the Lord. The text (2K 23:6-7) tells how he burned it and beat it to dust and cast the dust upon the graves of the common people. 1 K 18-19 refers to 400 prophets of Asherah alongside those of the Canaanite god, Baal.

The association of Asherah with trees in the Hebrew bible is very strong. For example, she is found under trees (1K 14:23; 2K 17:10)), is made of wood by human beings (1K 14:15, 2K 16:3-4) and is erected by human beings (2K 17:1). The Asherah often occurs in conjunction with shrines on high places, which may also be to other gods such as Baal, and frequently is mentioned in association with the host of heaven. Richard Pettey (1990:153-4) has catalogued each reference and produced tables showing all combinations of Asherah with images, pillars, high places and altars. Using these he argued that Asherah, always associated with the worship of a deity whether JHWH or Baal, is a cultic object used along with the altars, high places and pillars in the service of such deities which included Yahweh (this is also the position of widely quoted biblical exegete Saul Olyan. 1988). It is rather surprising considering the numerous references to trees in connection with Asherah that Pettey does not include them in his formula. To the question

n was Asherah a Goddess of the Israelites? he answers both no and yes. (Pettey 1990: 210) Certainly no, he says, the biblical authors were unanimous in their abhorrence of Asherah worship, but, yes, she was without doubt popularly accepted as the goddess of Israel. One thing is certain: that the Asherah with attendant asherim has many forms but is never far from trees or the wood of trees.

Where you would find an Asherah?

First you would look on every high hill and under every green tree," (e.g. Jer 2:20, Jer 3:6, Isa 57:5). There you may discover that she is also associated with sexual activities. In the words of the biblical writers, the people of Israel who worshipped her there bowed down playing the harlot, or burned with lust among the oaks. We will return to this subject later. It will however be seen immediately that Asherah was a vital force in the life of the people of Israel, and indeed Raphael Patai in his study of the Hebrew goddess has calculated that "the statue of Asherah was present in the temple for no less than 236 years, two-thirds of the time the Solomonic temple stood in Jerusalem." This worship, he asserts, was part of the legitimate religion approved and led by the king the court and the priesthood". (Patai.1990: 38) So those seeking Asherah would find her in groves and on the hills, and in the temple of JHWH itself. The question now to be answered is:

What would you find?

We see that it is difficult to define Asherah. She is female and something divine that people worship. She appears to be made of wood. She is a living tree that can be planted and cut down, or, she is erected and made by human beings; she stands both in the temple of the Lord and at the shrine of Baal; she is connected with pillars and, in some texts, with the mysterious host of heaven. There are many asherim yet there is one who is worshipped in the temple of Yahweh. She has 400 priestesses serving her. She is worshipped on high hills and under green trees. She is referred to in the singular and in the plural.

Answers to what has often been called the puzzle of Asherah have been attempted for hundreds of years. The most ancient commentators whose works are still extant are the rabbis who wrote the Mishnah, the Oral Law, in about the second and third centuries of this era. The Mishnah's definition of an Asherah is any tree worshipped by a heathen, or any tree which is worshipped.. The great rabbi Akibah said "wherever thou findest a high mountain or a lofty hill and a green tree know that an idol is there". (Danby: 1933:441). Trees described by the rabbis as being an asherah or part of an asherah include grapevines, pomegranates, walnuts, myrtles and willows (Danby:1933:90,176). From this it will be seen that these early lawmakers denied Asherah as part of the Hebrew religion but recognised her as a divinity worshipped by the "heathen", and treated her as a living tree or living part of a tree.

Their testimony was made in exile and under persecution from the Romans, but still within community memory of a former Israel which though a tributary state to Rome, was able most of the time to order its own religious affairs, and to continue in the vast memory of its long religious life. Because of this I am inclined to take their view very seriously even though some modern scholars do not agree with them.

John Day, one of the current leaders in the field of Ancient Near Eastern studies expresses a majority consensus when he declares that no serious scholar today believes the Asherah was a living tree. (Day:1986 402) A minority opinion in favour comes from the French scholar Andre Lemaire. Day points out (Day:1986:385-408) that in the late 19th and early 20th century before the major discovery at ancient Ugarit in Northern Syria, (today called Ras Shamra), of Canaanite material (which we shall be examining a little later on) three main views obtained conc

erning the identity of biblical Asherah. The German school believed she was the goddess Astarte or her symbol; the British school led by William Robertson Smith, the centenary of whose death was commemorated last year by a distinguished gathering at his alma mater, Aberdeen University, thought that Asherah was not the name of a deity but of a sacred symbol, a wooden pole, such as a maypole used as a cult object. This is still the position of a few scholars, notably Saul Olyan, and Baruch Margalit. It is conceded, that this symbol might be a faint echo of a previous Canaanite deity.

John Day's third category is that Asherah is both a sacred object and a goddess, and this reading he believes is now mostly accepted and most consistent with the evidence (1983: 398). Ruth Hestrin, of the Israel Museum in Jerusalem has gone further and built this into an extremely satisfactory solution to the conundrum. (Hestrin 1991:50-59). She states that the goddess Asherah is represented in the bible by three of her manifestations - as an image representing the goddess herself, as a green tree, and as the asherim, tree trunks. She points out that this interpretation fits well with the that of the rabbis statement in the Mishnah. (It is of interest that the question Is She One or Many? is one of the most pressing questions now being addressed by the present-day goddess movement (see Long: Feminist Theology, May 1997), and although it cannot be pursued here, it seems as if a study of biblical Asherah may provide some pointers to answers.)

The major reason for the substantial recognition of Asherah as a goddess and for the current explosion of interest in her status and function is the discovery of texts and iconographic material in the territories now Syria, Palestine, Sinai and Israel.

We will look at four major discoveries: In the first Asherah may be recognised as a pre-biblical Canaanite goddess in her own right; in the second and third we have Israelite depictions and inscriptions linking Yahweh and Asherah, while in the fourth pictures of her connect her closely with those of the Tree of Life.

The Ras Shamra texts

In 1929 a substantial discovery was made in Northern Syria, of texts dating to the Bronze age of about 1400BCE. They contained a cycle of divine myths of the Canaanite people. From them, we learn that chief among the gods were El, the father god, and his consort, the Lady Athirat (Ugaritic version of Hebrew Asherah). Asherah's titles included Creatress of all the Gods, and Mistress of Sexual Rejoicing. She was also called rbt ym which has been variously translated as Lady who walks on the sea or perhaps She who walks on the dragon - both suggested by Albright in 1940. A contemporary Hebrew scholar Baruch Margalit remarks (Margalit 1990:266-7) the fact that this interpretation of the divine name Athirat/Asherah endured for nearly half a century is a measure of its appeal as well as the unparalleled authority of its author. However, he yields to linguistic objections raised by other scholars and eventually agrees with John Day that probably the simpler solution, Lady of the Sea, is a preferred alternative. It is often remarked that this title would suit a deity of the Canaanites who lived on the coastline. Later the Israelites took over the higher inland countryside, and this title of Asherah faded from use among them.

The Ras Shamra material shows Asherah to be a powerful deity: she procures a palace for the god Baal when he is unable to do so himself; she is in some conflict with El, who asks Am I am slave that I am must do her bidding? (Driver, *ibid*) but indeed he finds he must; Frank M. Cross in his ground-breaking "Canaanite Myth and Hebrew Epic" (1973) designates her "as the primary wife of El" and as such the "Creatress of creatures" as well as "the creatress of the gods" (Cross: 1973:15, 32). Her function he believes is as a mother goddess.

Baruch Margalit proposes (1990:269) a different reading of her name: it is "she

who walks behind", and, he declares, this describes a wife. His interpretation is idiosyncratic and there is little support for it by other scholars. In fact, a quite different appreciation of Asherah's position in the Canaanite world comes to the fore when it is realised that she is also addressed as Qudsu, holy, and identified with a goddess of that name who (Hestrin and others) was well known in Egypt as a goddess of love at the time of the Phoenician or Canaanite influence there. Mark Smith (1990: 94) points to passages in the Ras Shamra texts that may be relative to the equating of Qudsu with Asherah: in both of them nudity and lovemaking is inferred. In fact, it is usually conceded that Asherah/Athirat and Qudsu are identical deities, whose major function is to do with sexuality and the prosperity of the land and people, arising from it. Such a goddess is a potent deity in her own right, and we may presume that although she appears as a consort of El, ideas of a kind of wifehood that means walking behind, are in the commentator's mind rather than in the text.

An echo of Asherah come to us in the South West of England. IES Edwards (1955:49-57) describes a relief of a goddess called Qudshu-Astarte-Anath which was presented to Winchester College in 1951. Edwards remarks: "No precise information is available concerning either its original acquisition or the date it reached England". She is represented as standing on a lion; above her is a disk and a crescent - perhaps the sun and moon. She is almost naked and is holding a lotus blossom and serpents. This resembles many other depictions which show very similar scenes where sometimes a woman, sometimes a sacred tree takes the centre place. Apparently Winchester no longer has this interesting artifact.

An example of the interchangeability of the tree and the goddess is suggested by the Ancient Near Eastern scholar John Gray. Referring (1967:149) to a relief on an ivory casket found at Minet el Beida, in a neighbouring mound to Ras Shamra and of equivalent date, he writes (Winthom 67 149): "it depicts the Mother Goddess offering heads of corn to two rampant caprids (animals of the goat family.) This is a significant sculpture as it seems a variant on the motif of two caprids similarly flanking a date palm found most abundantly in the vicinity of Tel el Ajjud, Palestine. The Minet -el-Beida sculpture suggests that the tree corresponds to the Mother Goddess and is in fact the Tree of Life." We shall see later other examples of this interchangeability and identification of tree and goddess.

Kuntillet Ajrud and Khirbet el Qom

The second and third of our categories that have persuaded many scholars to regard biblical Asherah as a goddess in her own right consist of shrines bearing texts and pictures. Archaeologist Ze'ev Meshel disclosed in 1979 that he had discovered a rock shelter at Kuntillet Ajrud in Sinai, possibly used by travellers on cross country routes (Meshel. 1979:24-36).

It contained drawings and inscriptions both on the walls and on pithoi - large storage jars. They showed a seated female on a throne playing a musical instrument, portrayals of a cow and her calf and numerous other figures, some in procession. In his communication publishing his findings he asked: "Did Yhwh have a consort?" This arresting question was based on two inscriptions, which read as an appeal for blessings from "Jhwh and his Asherah" or "Yhwh and Asherah" (the word in question is Asherata). Emerton, (1982:2-20), Freedman (1987:241-249), Beck, (1982:3-68), Dever, (1984: 21-37) Oden (1976:31-36), Zevit, (1984:39-47) Hestrin, (1991:50-59), Hadley (1987:50-62) and Day (1986:385-408) are among those who have taken up the task of providing accurate translations and interpretations of this material, but there is still no consensus on a translation of Asherata. David Noel Freedman even quotes Shakespeare: Can it be, he asks, that we may compare the form "his Asherah" to the last words of Romeo and Juliet: "For never was a story of more woe than this of Juliet and her Romeo." (1987:249).

A similar inscription found at Khirbet El Qom - presumed site of the biblical Ma

kkedah - reinforces the problems.

Judith Hadley of Cambridge has examined this and suggests the reading: (1987:51-62)

Blessed be Uriyahu by Yahweh
For from his enemies, by his (YHWHs) Asherah, he Yhwh saved him
(again the term Asherata is used.)

Hadley discusses the linguistic problems in some detail; the question returns: do the words actually mean "his" Asherah, or Asherah in her own right? Hadley comes to the conclusion that in this instance, Yhwh remains the subject of the blessing, but it is carried out by "his Asherah". Other scholars provide different understandings: for example, the meaning of Asherah in the context might be "holy place" (Meshel), a reading which links with previous attempts to define Asherah in terms of a grove or shrine (Albright (1942:77-78), Day, (1986:388-9) Wiggins (1993:193). Emerton opts for "a wooden cult object representing the goddess". (1982:20) By contrast, Zevit translates the inscription as: I blessed Uriyahu to Yahweh and from his enemies oh Asherata save him, where Asherata is an invocation to the named goddess herself (1984:39-47). There is also the question asked by William Dever whether the seated female figure and the depiction of a sacred tree and a cow with her calf may themselves be portrayals of the goddess.()

Dever has been making these questions a prime concern for the last sixteen years. He believes that the concept that Asherah may have been personified and actually worshipped in ancient Israel as the consort of JHwh has been consistently downplayed.()... he contends that the archaeological discoveries provide both texts and pictorial representations that clearly identify Asherah as the consort of Jhwh, at least in some circles of ancient Israel.

It is impossible here to outline the many complexities of the various scholarly arguments, but it can safely be stated that the divine figure of YHwh is associated with either a cult object or a divine and female personage. Opinion on which of these seems to be equally divided; but even assuming that "cult object" is the more accurate interpretation the questions remain of what function that object performed, and whether it was a representation of the goddess. It is clear that positive identification of Asherah as a Hebrew goddess at least in some circles in ancient Israel is much enhanced by these finds.

The Cult Stand at Taanach

The fourth of our archaeological indications of the nature of Asherah takes the form of a pottery stand uncovered at Tel Taanach in Israel, identified as a cult stand or an object used in ritual and worship. Ruth Hestrin has described this object extensively and discussed its possible religious background (Hestrin 1987: 61-77). It is dated to the 10th c BCE and is remarkable for the number and subject of the scenes that decorate it. Hestrin describes them as follows: (1987:65)

"In the lowest register a crudely shaped naked woman flanked by two standing lions is represented...the second register has an opening in the centre flanked by two sphinxes with a lions body, birds wings and a female head. Two round protuberances are seen between the legs. The faces resemble that of the naked woman. A sacred tree is represented in the centre of the third register composed of a heavy central trunk from which sprout symmetrically three pairs of curling branches. Two ibexes stand on their hind legs in an antithetical position.. flanking this group are two lionesses almost identical to those in the lowest register". Notice particularly the shape of the sacred tree and the number of branches - you will see that the trunk plus the branches make it seven fold. I shall refer to this later when we discuss the seven-branched candlestick, the Menorah.

Analysing the decorative material on the cult stand, Hestrin comes to the conclusion that two of the registers show an Asherah, once as a naked woman, and once represented by her symbol the tree. The very fact that the lions in the registers are almost identical in shape and position indicates, she says, that they belong to the same deity. Representations of a nude goddess flanked by lions and holding snakes and lotus blossoms are known widely in the Ancient Near East. In particular, as already mentioned, those uncovered in Ugarit and Minet-el-Beida show similar themes, as do portrayals of Qudshu from Egypt.

Iconographic evidence alone can only suggest an identification between the goddess Asherah-Qudshu and a sacred tree; but support for such an identification is considerable when seen in relation to our textual material. John Day, discussing what he calls the sacred Asherah pole— that is, a pole from a sacred tree and taking on its significance, writes (1986:404): "It may be that the sacred Asherah pole had the form of a stylised tree. The evidence for this I would seek in Hos 14. 9 (Eng 8) There the prophet makes Yahweh declare: " Ephraim what has he still to do with idols? It is I who answer and look after him. I am like a luxuriant cypress, from me comes your fruit". Day continues: "The bold comparison of Yhwh with a tree, unique in the Hebrew bible juxtaposed with the condemnation of idolatry has suggested to many scholars that Hosea is polemicising against idolatry associated with Canaanite tree symbolism. Could this be a polemic against Asherah? A number of scholars have believed that it is"(ibid).

The implications of this suggestion of Day's are far-reaching, and for me they extend as far as the Garden of Eden. The narrative there tells us that the tree forbidden was of knowledge of good and evil; but when humans ate its fruit, they were then denied access to the tree of life. Although this had not been forbidden originally, Gen 3:22 has God saying that the human beings having eaten of the forbidden tree might next " take of the tree of life, and eat and live for ever".

It is time to look further at the Tree of Life.

The Tree of Life

The idea of a Tree of Life is a concept held by many peoples of different cultures. Roger Cook (1974) has surveyed this phenomenon from Ygdrasil, the great tree which is the Scandinavian axis of the world" and which links the underworld, middle earth and the heavenly land of the gods; to the.. cosmic Bhodi tree under which the Buddha gained enlightenment. Through varying cultures and times the Tree of Life has been a symbol both of this world and a world of the divine. It represents the theme of rebirth, along with the union of opposites. (1974: 25,26). In one instance the great tree is said to shake, bringing about the destruction of the gods and the world. However, concealed within its trunk are the seeds of the world's renewal in the form of a man and a woman from whose union a new race will appear to re-populate the world.

Cook writes: (1974:13): "the full breasted tree divinity is one of the many epiphanies or divine manifestations of the Great Mother Goddess known in mythology the world over. As the Earth Mother (Tellus Mater) she embodies the regenerative powers contained in the earth and the waters...(she is) a perpetual source of cosmic fertility. Woman and Tree alike embody this Great Earth Mother for both are visible manifestations of her fruitfulness".

Whether we agree or not with Cook's description of one universal great goddess, there is no doubt of the association between sacred trees, fertility and a female dimension of the divine. All are involved in the continuation and nurture of life in this world and sometimes in the next. Fertility, in the sense of the continuation and sustenance of the earth and of people is celebrated sexually in the shade of the Tree, or grove; this has been the practice in many cultures among

them the people of Israel as we know from our biblical texts. There, as elsewhere, the power of life giving and life sustaining is associated not only with the Tree of Life but very often is one of the attributes of the female divine.

An account of the mythology of the sacred tree is given by Yarden (1971) who connects it closely with the Menorah as we shall see later. Yarden describes an ancient myth of "the cosmic or World Tree usually conceived at the centre of the earth.....with its roots in the Underworld...and crown in Heaven(1971:35). He surveys the extent of this myth in the Ancient Near Eastern world and its echoes in the biblical texts. He records that "representations of sacred trees or their branches appear on even the oldest finds" (1971:37).

He surveys the extent of this myth in the Ancient Near Eastern world and its echoes in the biblical texts and records that "representations of sacred trees or their branches appear on even the oldest finds" (1971:37).

In this connection, we will look to the distinguished biblical scholar Carol Meyers, whom I will later be introducing in connection with the Menorah. In an account of Ancient Near Eastern iconography (1976:25) she writes "it is hardly an exaggeration to indicate that the sacredness of vegetation and trees has been a recurrent and integral theme in a wide range of cultures spanning most areas of the globe and most epochs of human history... the sacred quality of trees lies in the fact of their embodiment of the life principle" (p95). She speaks of "the widespread association of vegetal life with the generative power of the divinity", resulting in the common phenomenon of the manifestation of deity within or at certain trees which would be especially favoured; these trees would lead the worshipper in the direction of the divinity. Furthermore the divinity revealed in the tree is also the source of the hoped-for life after death.. thus the theophany motif of the sacred tree becomes blended inextricably with the concept of life eternal. The tree of life in the sense of immortal life becomes an inseparable aspect of the regenerative principle contained within plant life" (1976: 96). Here we have clearly set out the relationship between the tree which gives us the daily fruit of our life, and its relationship with divinity and with eternal life. We also can understand from this some of the relationship of fertility practices to the sacred.

Anne Primavesi, (90:240-243)) a leading ecofeminist, has posed the question: why was it a garden in which our first parents were set? And answered it by saying that the first thing that is needed for life is food, and it is in a garden or orchard of trees that fruit comes readily to the hand. As today we hear of the enormous tragedies of starvation throughout the world's southern peoples, caused solely by the hand of man we may ponder Anne's words again. To live, human beings must eat, and our first parents were put in a place where good things to eat were abundant. So the very first meaning of the Tree of Life might indicate that it will actually keep us alive.

Howard Wallace (1985) in a Ph.D. dissertation entitled The Eden Narrative analyses the different meanings of the word life in Ancient Near Eastern literature. Looking at the Babylonian epics of the third millennium BCE which contain accounts of various heroes of that period who attempted to find eternal life, he comments that it is mostly said to be available from plants or leaves. For example, the hero Gilgamesh at one point finds a plant that might have provided what he sought but it is stolen from him by a serpent. Another hero Adapa, through a mistaken decision does not partake of the food and water of life actually offered to him. The divine Ishtar in her descent to the Underworld, in the Sumerian version of the story is given the plant of life. Albright has described (Hebraica 36. 191 9-20 258-9) how Gilgamesh reaches the goddess Siduri-Sabatu. She is seated under a vine in the Paradise garden which is described as of "dazzling beauty". The vine is its centrepiece. Siduri-Sabatu is addressed as Goddess of Wisdom, Genius of Life, and referred to as "Keeper of the Fruit of Life". He asks her for the g

gift of eternal life but she refuses; Wallace writes: The aspect of "life" in these stories changes from one to the other, (but) the various aspects are all part of the broader concept of life in all its abundance; it is worthy to note that the gaining of divine qualities of life is associated with ...eating or drinking some substance which possesses the magical powers to grant this gift". Wallace makes the point that usually the substance needed will be procured from a tree. (1985:101-3).

He compares these texts with Psalm 1, which declares of someone who seeks wisdom : " he will be like a tree transplanted by channels of water which gives its fruit in season whose leaf does not wither. " There we may understand a tree of life that is both temporal and eternal. Its fruit brings abundance in this world but its unwithering qualities bring it into eternal life. Wallace then discusses the Hebrew words for life and sees a possible connection between life- the Hebrew word hayyim, and Eve, Hebrew word Hayya., He proposes a strong association between the two. Can Eve, called the Mother of all living, be identified as the Tree of Life itself? Wallace cites a fertility motif as the connecting link between the two. He sees a strong association between Eve, the Tree of Life, and Asherah, creatress of the gods, and writes (1985:114) "it is not impossible that a tree which is associated with fertility and the mother goddess figure on one level of a story could take on other life-giving aspects, also a divine gift at another level, especially when we remember the broad spectrum covered by the word "life".

The biblical writers lived with the evidences around them of sacred fertility rituals on every high hill and under every green tree in honour of the goddess Asherah. It is not impossible that Wallace's identification of Eve in this way could account for the hostility shown to her and the malediction set upon what might be thought to be the joyful human condition of sexuality and reproduction. Wallace's identification of Eve, with Asherah and with the Tree of Life, may be deemed by some to be a walk along the wild side of speculation, yet its resonances with the polemics of the material are strong.

Thus, the ancient monotheistic heritage of the religious system that became traditional Judaism, where the deity is always expressed in the masculine gender, is challenged by current archaeological and textual evidence. This suggests that a goddess or goddesses were worshipped not as part of a residue of foreign cult, but in her own right in the Hebrew religion. She would be associated with all that is meant by life and symbolised by the Tree of Life: an indwelling Deity who was the source of not only of food, sexuality, reproduction, at a mundane level, but also wisdom and possibly the promise of immortal life. The high hills, green trees and groves where she was worshipped were expressions of herself; parts of trees were made into images of her or set up as poles in her honour. Traditionalists might still argue that all these forms of worship were extraneous to the Hebrew religion and were in fact "heathen"; but the current evidence is mounting against them. It is reinforced by a concept of the Tree of Life that has been part of normative Judaism for a millennium and a half: part of normative Judaism but hidden from more than half of Judaism's adherents. I refer to the Kabbalah.

This is the mystical system practised until recently only by an elite few, who must be male and married and over forty years of age. It was kept secret from everyone else, notably women. It is the Kabbalah, now more available to those wishing to study it, no matter their sex and age. At its heart stands a Tree of Life. Surrounding the Tree in all its glory is a divine female entity, named the Shekinah, the dwelling place of God. The nearest that the traditional commentators came to the feminine Shekinah was to say it represented the community of Israel, historically in a marriage relationship with God. But distinguished Kabbalah scholar Gershon Scholem found differently. He writes: (1969: 105) "the Shekinah becomes an aspect of God that is a quasi-independent feminine element within him. . .the necessary discovery of the female element with God...regarded with the utmost

st misgiving by non-Kabbalistic sources was a mystic conception of the feminine principle". The Shekina reflects her own and God's glory, she is the Face of God and she envelopes the Tree in her shining light. She is sometimes represented as a Paradise Garden full of luxurious trees (1969: 58). The Tree of Life in itself, is the image of God's creation, it offers a depiction of what Cook has called "the mysterious relationship between the invisible transcendent god and the visible world of creation" (Cook 1974: 18). The image used is that of an inverted tree, descending from heaven to earth. Its branches are emanations - called sephiroth; they represent the divine powers and spheres through which the human being can work towards the mystical divine. It is impossible here to address this subject with any but the briefest of glances; it has been the basis of a Western tradition of esoteric religious magical working, has been related to the continuous underground hermetic tradition and today continues to fascinate new generations of seekers with its profundities. It has been and is understood as a most powerful symbol of divine glory. We cannot avoid the connection of this Kabbalistic Tree, an ongoing conception from early rabbinical times to its first publication in the 13th century of our era, with the sacred trees we have been addressing. Certainly there appears to be a large time lag, but Kabbalists will affirm that their material can be traced continuously to biblical times.. The divine female element was re-created, in the understanding of many of the Kabbalists, to become the Shekinah. It is not too fanciful to propose that in her is a resonance of Asherah, whose name and presence became obscured but never lost. We will now look at the connections of this material with

The Menorah

While the Kabbala was practised by men in the synagogues away from the domestic hearth, there was - and is - in their homes, presided over by the woman, a powerful symbol of that same Tree of Life which was the heart of their study. This is the Menorah. Cook describes it as "an important .. Jewish symbol related to the cosmic tree". (1974:20) We first hear of it in Exodus 25: 31-40.

"You shall make a lamp-stand of pure gold....its cups its capitals and its flowers shall be of one piece with it. And there shall be six branches going out of its sides, three branches of the lampstand out of one side of it and three branches out of the other side of it; three cups made like almonds, each with its capitals and flower, on the one branch, and three cups each with its capitals and flower on the other branch - so for the six branches going out from the lampstand. " This lampstand was the desert Tabernacle Menorah guarding and throwing light towards the Ark of the Covenant.

Note that its cups were to be shaped in the form of almonds, which themselves are precursors of returning life to the trees in spring, being the first tree to flower before even its leaves have opened. Carol Meyers today a distinguished theologian made the Tabernacle Menorah her Ph.D. dissertation in 1974. She addresses the relationship between God and the Trees of the garden, and offers the perception (1974: 138/9): "in the primeval cycle of Genesis, the primacy of God separate from nature is the clear message. The mythological forces represented by the life-giving nature of plant life ...are confronted ..in a direct way. ..nevertheless there is not a radical and permanent breaking off of such ideas. The power of the underlying mythic ideas was enormous and is not to be underestimated. It evidently lay beneath the surface ready to materialise for a long time during Israel's history" Here Meyers points to the continuity of ideas hidden perhaps with in Hebrew monotheism that support the concept of the Genesis Eden narrative as polemical.

When she turns to the Menorah of Exodus, the Tabernacle Menorah, she examines in detail its relation to the iconography and texts concerning sacred trees in the Ancient Near East. She writes that her study "has shown that the tabernacle menorah in form and detail belongs to the conventional way for the sanctity of vege

table life to be depicted." (1974: 133). She declares that it has long been recognised that because of the language employed to describe the Menorah and because of its appearance as a thickened stem or shaft from which its branches project that the whole shape strongly resembles a stylised tree. Meyers cites S.A. Cook (1974) who pointed out this some time ago, largely on the basis of its representation in later Jewish art. He would, she says, have laid it down that the candle stick and the tree inevitably tend to merge into one another. Goodenough also suggests this, pointing out that the vision of Zachariah (4:1-14) with trees flanking the Menorah perhaps preserves the original meaning of plant form imbued with sanctity." (Men 84) She argues: "A consideration of some of the details of such forms has revealed that there is a close morphological connection between arboreal expressions on ancient seals and monuments and the branched form assumed by the superstructure, as it were, of the tabernacle Menorah. (whose form) is exactly (that) taken by the quintessential stylised tree or branch in the Mesopotamian, Aegean, and Syro-Palestinian religions. Whereas there are various modes for expressing stylised plant life throughout Mesopotamian history it is precisely in the Late Bronze Age that a specific six plus one axis form not only comes to dominate but is also disseminated throughout the Eastern Mediterranean island and coastal areas". (1974: 118/119) Referring to the sanctity of the vegetable and plant life symbolised, she declares that it "involves both the fertility theme of the tree and the immortality concept". She calls attention to the variations in design of the Menorahs of the first and second Temples, and quotes first century Josephus' description of the latter: "facing the table, near the South Wall, stood a candelabrum of cast gold.. it was made up of globules, and lilies, pomegranates and little bowls...it terminated in seven branches, regularly disposed in a row. Each branch bore one lamp". The tree and plant allusions are clear here, as they also are in a Talmudic description which she quotes: "the cups were like Alexandrian goblets, the knobs like Cretan apples, and the flowers like blossoms around the capitals of columns" (1974: 37/38.)

The material that she presents is in line with the views of earlier Jewish scholars in this century concerning the relationship of the Menorah to the Kabbalistic Tree of Life. For example, Menahem Recanati calls attention to the vision of Zachariah, where the text of 4:10 reads "these seven (lamps) are the eyes of God". He claims that this asserts that God governs by means of the Sephirot emphasised by the seven branches of the Menorah: the divine power is exercised through the Menorah" (E. Jud. 11.1367/. Asher Ben David sees the Menorah as a symbol reflecting the world of the Sephirot. A similar view is taken by Bahqabr Asher.

L. Yarden (1971) has surveyed the Menorah from its inception until the present. He believes it has enormous significance in "fundamental conceptions of (hu)man-kind's most fundamental conceptions of Nature, of Life and Death of Cosmos and God. (1971:vi) he connects it with the ancient sacred tree (1971:35-40), and then discusses its light as the "light of God and the Torah" (1971:48) He shows its ubiquity throughout Jewish history in a series of remarkable pictures of synagogue vessels and decorations from early times until the present.

Present day Kabbalist Ze'ev ben Shimon Halevi argues that in the Menorah we can see a symbol of both the mystical and objective knowledge of the universe conveyed by God to Abraham and to Moses. He writes: " ..the construction of (Solomon's) Temple and the seven branched candlestick are both formulations of the Tree of Life". (p18). In an illustration of the Menorah as the Tree of Life he shows how its stem and branches indicate the different Sephiroth (emanations of God) which to the Kabbalist are the basis of study of eternal wisdom. Words shown at each candle flame are the names of each Sephira.

Halevi writes: "The Sephiroth ..might be regarded as a system of functions in a circuit through which flows a divine current. Any Sephiroth can change direction of flow.. power may be stepped up or down in all Sephiroth". (32) Obviously we cannot follow these paths here, and I am certainly not able to expound this comp

lex and intricate religious system.

If we now look at the Menorah in the religious life of Judaism it is clear that while it has a mystical significance which can lead the adept to the throne of the divine, yet throughout the whole history of Judaism it has taken the form of a practical symbol of everyday religious life. It is kept in the synagogue and in the home. Each winter a special version of it, with nine, not seven branches comes into use for nine days. This is at Chanukah, the winter festival of lights, commemorating the miracle of preservation of the oil for the lights in the Jerusalem temple in the 2nd century BCE when Judas Maccabeus and his brethren led a successful revolt against their imperial persecutors. (1 & 2 Maccabees) By coincidence only, certainly without intention, it happens that I am giving this lecture now on the eve of this year's Chanukah festival, the first candle flame of which will be lit on Menorahs in Jewish homes tomorrow evening.

Depictions of the Menorah are universal in Jewish history. A huge portrayal of it is shown on the triumphal arch of Titus in Rome, emphasising the plight of the Jews losing their home and going into slavery in 70CE, after the destruction of Jerusalem and the temple. Art historian Heinrich Strauss has called attention to the menorah on walls of ancient and medieval synagogues from Asia Minor to Spain as well as to those many in the modern era. He points to its depiction on coins, amulets and jewels of all kinds throughout the lands of the dispersion of the Jews, being particularly noticeable on Persian artefacts. Scribbled drawings of menorahs by Jewish prisoners awaiting execution can be seen on the walls of Roman catacombs, such as beneath the Villa Torlonia. Nearly two thousand years later similar designs were scratched at Auschwitz and Theresienstadt death camps, and when the memorial to the Warsaw Ghetto fighters was unveiled in 1963, two huge Menorahs were seen to be its most significant element.

The Menorah is a homely, as well as a sacred symbol, familiar to all Jewish families and a part of their life as it has been over the centuries. It is unlikely that the ordinary family and particularly the women of the house would be aware of any sacred significance other than its appearance in the story of Exodus and its identification with the Chanukah lights.

There is certainly no idea whatever in normative Judaism that this candlestick could be an image or symbol of, or could in any way resonate with, the goddess Asherah whom the biblical writers and traditional Judaism so abominate. Yet it appears that such a concept is not impossible.

In this talk I have tried to show that there is indeed a case to be made for this, even though it may be thought by some to be a surprising or even a scandalous suggestion.

Conclusions

To try and gather the threads together: it has only been possible to touch upon some of the themes that underlie a concept of the religion of the Hebrew people that is entirely new and surprising to most of us. Although the American scholar Morton Smith, (1971), some twenty-five years ago, opened up ideas concerning the worship of a Hebrew goddess in some circles of the ancient Hebrew religion, it is only recently that it has become accepted as a legitimate study and is attracting more and more interest. Its implications reach far outside traditional scholarship and impinge on our inner beliefs and our conduct derived from them.

I have suggested tonight that the Hebrew religion contains a female divine figure, Asherah, who may have been the consort of God, Yhwh, and also was interchangeable with the Tree of Life. This latter is represented by the Menorah, the seven-branched candlestick, a religious symbol in Judaism whose connection with the female aspect of divinity has been lost. Until the archaeological finds of this c

entury it was generally supposed that the forty texts in the Hebrew bible concerning Asherah, referred to wooden cult objects connected with earlier near eastern goddesses, associated with trees. To perceive in the biblical texts, any reference to the figure of Asherah as a Goddess in her own right, and certainly as a goddess of the Hebrews was condemned.

Re-assessment of this judgement is gaining ground among scholars of different disciplines because of archaeological discoveries. First Canaanite texts gave accounts of a powerful mother goddess named Goddess Asherah; then illustrations and inscriptions linked Yhwh and Asherah together in biblical times in a manner which could be construed to support the idea of a divine couple. This is entirely contrary to the accepted view of divine monotheism expressed solely in the masculine gender.

It was clear that the original description of Asherah as alien to the Hebrews religion could not be sustained; she had certainly been a Canaanite goddess; and it was possible that she was a Hebrew goddess. Further it had been observed that a sacred or cosmic tree attended by animals was a constant theme in Ancient Near Eastern iconography. The cult stand of Taanach gave major indications that the tree could be replaced by and was interchangeable with a female figure conjectured to be a goddess, with some evidence that she might be Asherah. The Tree of Life was generally considered to be dwelling place of the divine, source of fruitfulness, and nourished not only life here in this world, but held the hope of immortality. This background to the Eden story has led to scholarly enquiries concerning its polemic origin. Could the texts have been written as rhetoric against worship of a goddess, who was likely to be Asherah?

Alongside this theme there runs a parallel concept where a stylised version of the Tree of Life is created in the form the seven-branched candlestick the Menorah described in the Book of Exodus. This stood in the first Jerusalem temple and a similar model was placed in the second. Eventually models abounded and came to be a symbol of the Hebrew people. At a later date such replicas were connected with the Maccabean struggles, and continue to hold that identity, as well as that of the Tree of Life.

As time went on, the idea of a divine female figure at the core of Judaism was totally forgotten except within the Kabbalah, a secret mystical form of the religion. Central to this system is the Tree of Life concept, where the ten emanations are enveloped in the glory of the divine female Shekinah. Praxis within the Kabbalah included identification of the Tree of Life with the Menorah. I have suggested that we may reasonably perceive resonances between the Menorah and the biblical figure of Asherah, herself very possibly connected with the Tree of Life.

Reference has also been made to the Eden story and scholarly commentators who believe that it was composed as a polemic against the worship of Asherah. Referring back to my original question: Was the story of the denial of the Tree of Life to humans in Gen 3:24 a prohibition of worship of the goddess Asherah? It is suggested that an affirmative answer may respectably be given.

Finally, I would like to say that raising these questions is an expression of the profound shift that feminist theology makes to our thinking. As a Jewish woman myself I was until very recently quite unaware of the heritage I have outlined, and I find it inspiring and liberating. I am particularly moved by the Menorah, since now I am able to see in it a reminder that in my background religion of strict monotheism a female aspect or dimension or symbol of the divine may have been present from the beginning. Although Jewish memories of her significance became distorted and eventually faded, yet a symbol of her has been continually present in our homes. I feel that to be a reinforcement of great strength and inspiration since it help restore to women their full personhood of humanity and divinity.

It remains for me, with great pleasure, to thank Dr. Rae and all those many people who have been so kind to me here, and assisted me in every way. I cannot mention them all but I must pick out the Theology Department where Professor Adrian Thatcher and his colleagues have gone out of their way to help me, and in particular my thanks to Dr. Lisa Isherwood, without whose energy and determination I certainly would never have undertaken this study. I want to thank Sue Stephens in the Library and Mike Pepper in Media Services whose help has been precious and exceedingly efficient. Lastly a big thank you to the students with whom I have had much so much pleasure in discussion and teaching. It has seemed to me that the connections between the three generations in those lecture rooms – the young students of my grandchildren's generation, the mature students of their parent's age, and myself, were indeed an expression of a true Tree of Life. Thank you.

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Asherah, the Tree of Life and the Menorah
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